



Helen Keller: Worker for the Blind

Helen Keller. We hear the name and fragments of a life come to mind. We see her, age seven, at the water pump where she first learned the meaning of language. There she is, still a child, on Alexander Graham Bell's lap. We see her as an adult, that smile of blazing intensity always on her face, posing with Charlie Chaplin on a movie set, feeling Katherine Cornell's throat, visiting one U.S. President after another in the Oval Office, rapturous, her arms outstretched to catch the vibrations, in the midst of a swirling group of Martha Graham dancers, on a dais with Prime Minister Nehru, in a receiving line with

Winston Churchill. Out of a life lived as one of the first of the 20th century media celebrities, we have these fragments, a misty understanding of her importance as a symbol of indomitable courage, perseverance, indeed transcendence over adversity. Because our relationship with celebrities is a love-hate one, because we are alternately drawn to and repelled by them, we occasionally wonder what they did to earn their fame. We occasionally even wonder about Helen Keller. When we do, perhaps grudgingly, own that she earned her celebrity, we think of her as having earned it as an author, as uncrowned royalty, as someone we elected by some mysterious process to represent us at our public rituals and ceremonies. One thing we don't tend to do is think of her as a worker for the blind. Working for the blind is not the stuff of which celebrity is made. And yet that is what Helen Keller did, both in an inspirational and in an official sense, for the better part of her life.

Helen Keller as a Radcliffe student

Helen Keller was the first deaf-blind person to graduate from college. While her passion for learning was the paramount reason she insisted on going to college, she was acutely aware of her ability to set an example for others and later said, "It was my right as well as my duty to complete my college course so as to demonstrate how doubly handicapped children could be developed."

During her Radcliffe years, many friends spent long hours embossing books so that she could do the required reading, books she later lent to other less fortunate blind students, her primitive version of today's Braille Book Bank.

Helen Keller wrote *The Story of My Life* while she was still in college. This book, a major factor in creating more positive attitudes toward blind and deaf-blind persons, is still in print today, more than 75 years later.





AAWB Convention, Boston, 1907. Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller are seated in the front row, the eighth and ninth from the left.

In 1906, Helen Keller was appointed a member of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. She and Annie Sullivan and her husband John Macy were living on a Wrentham, Mass. farm that was becoming by happenstance—because no existing organization for the blind took that responsibility—the first national clearinghouse for information about blindness. Letters asking for advice from mothers of blind children, from blind people themselves, from teachers, doctors, legislators poured in. People from all over the world wanting information found their way to Wrentham too. Helen had to read or Annie had to read to her all the material available on how problems of the blind were handled in this country and in western Europe as well so that the requests for help could be answered intelligently. Helen typed all the replies herself, a duty she was to continue to have since neither Annie, nor later Polly Thomson, could type!

One of Helen Keller's signal contributions as a worker for the blind took place in 1907. The *Ladies Home Journal* published her article on ophthalmia neonatorum, a leading cause of blindness in newborns which usually resulted from venereal disease. While the cause of the affliction had long been known, the taboos of polite society had confined notice of it to medical journals. Helen Keller's article played a pivotal role in counteracting ignorance of the cause of blindness in as much as 30 percent of blind children. In 1908 the organization later known as the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness was formed as a direct response to the campaign to abolish ophthalmia neonatorum and by the 1920s it had effectively been wiped out.

In 1907 Helen Keller also began writing for a new magazine called *Outlook for the Blind* (now the *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*) and for the *Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind* as well.



Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan Macy and Polly Thomson dressed for vaudeville act.

Vaudeville and the Chautauqua lecture circuit were the early part of this century's equivalent of today's television variety shows, talk shows and documentaries. The Helen Keller "Act" on the lecture circuit and in vaudeville consisted of an introduction by Anne Sullivan in which she described how she had taught a blind, deaf and mute child to communicate, several statements by Helen, translated by Annie, and finally questions from the audience. The lecture and vaudeville tours were undertaken because Helen Keller, contrary to legend, was not a rich woman, but they undoubtedly had great public education value as well.

Helen Keller joined the fledgling American Foundation for the Blind in 1924. Finally there was a national organization to take on the information dissemination responsibility she and Annie Sullivan had had to perform so many years before in the Wrentham farmhouse. Helen's first duties at the AFB revolved around the development of a Helen Keller Endowment Fund. Later on, she proved an effective advocate and publicist for the enactment of government programs to serve the needs of the blind and the deaf-blind. And after World War II, she traveled all over the world to promote the establishment of programs for the blind in developing countries for the American Foundation for Overseas Blind (now Helen Keller International), AFB's sister organization.



President and Mrs. Herbert Hoover's White House reception for delegates to the 1931 World Conference on Work for the Blind which was held in New York City and co-sponsored by the American Foundation for the Blind and the American Braille Press (now Helen Keller International). Helen Keller was very active in the planning and execution of this seminal conference and it was she who arranged the White House reception with Mrs. Hoover.



1930. Helen Keller with Congresswoman Ruth Pratt of New York, co-sponsor of the bill to establish branch libraries for the blind.

Helen Keller made her first appearance before the U.S. Congress when she testified in favor of passage of the Pratt-Smoots bill to provide a national system of libraries for the blind under the direction of the Library of Congress. The bill became law in 1931. The next year the American Foundation for the Blind asked for her help in raising funds for the initial establishment of the talking book program but she refused, whether because of her deafness or because she thought it was a luxury during the Depression, is unclear. Later, she did publicize it, and met with President Roosevelt in 1935 to plead for government support of the project. Ironically, Annie Sullivan, who had lost most of her vision by the early 1930s, was one of the first users of talking books.

Providing radios free of charge to blind persons was one of the earliest AFB projects. Encouraging manufacturers to donate radios or provide them to the Foundation at minimal cost was one of Helen Keller's first projects as an AFB staff member. One manufacturer donated 250 radios in response to one letter from her. In this 1927 photo, she is standing by one of the radios donated in response to her letter.



Helen Keller didn't let her strong and deep-seated pacifist convictions interfere with promoting services for blinded victims of war. During World War I she followed closely the activities of Sir Arthur Pearson, a blind man who founded St. Dunstan's home for the rehabilitation of British soldiers who had lost their sight in combat. For a time, she and Annie seriously considered going to the front but they realized that their combined handicaps would prevent them from making any real contribution. Helen, however, maintained a heavy correspondence with blinded soldiers, made speeches and became active in the Permanent Blind Relief War Fund. In 1919, when the fund was incorporated she became a member of the first board.

From that time until her death, the convinced pacifist's name was to be irrevocably connected with the cause of the war blinded in particular and victims of war in general.



Helen Keller with Sergeant Major Robert Middlemiss, a British soldier wounded in the Battle of Gallipoli, in 1917 at the New York headquarters of the Permanent Blind Relief War Fund.



Helen Keller visiting wounded American soldiers during World War II.



Addressing a crowd in Hiroshima in 1948. Helen is on the right.

Giving and getting recognition for work with the blind



Helen Keller presents the Migel Medal to Sen. Robert Wagner in 1939. The Migel Medal had been established by the AFB in 1937 to recognize outstanding lay and professional contributions to work for the blind. From the Award's initiation until shortly before her death, Helen Keller was a member of the "secret" committee which awarded the medals. AFB legend has it that she was the only member of the committee with veto power and that she wasn't shy about using it.



Helen Keller receiving the Ambrose J. Shotwell Award of the American Association of Workers for the Blind at the 1951 biennial conference in Daytona Beach, Florida.

Helen Keller receiving the 1951 Lions International Gold Medal.



Helen Keller receiving the President's Committee for Employment of the Handicapped Award for 1955 from Major General Melvin J. Maas, then head of the committee.



Helen Keller presents the first Helen Keller International Award to Colonel Edwin Baker, the first Canadian officer to be blinded in World War I and one of the founders of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

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